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Text and Photos: Andreas Licht

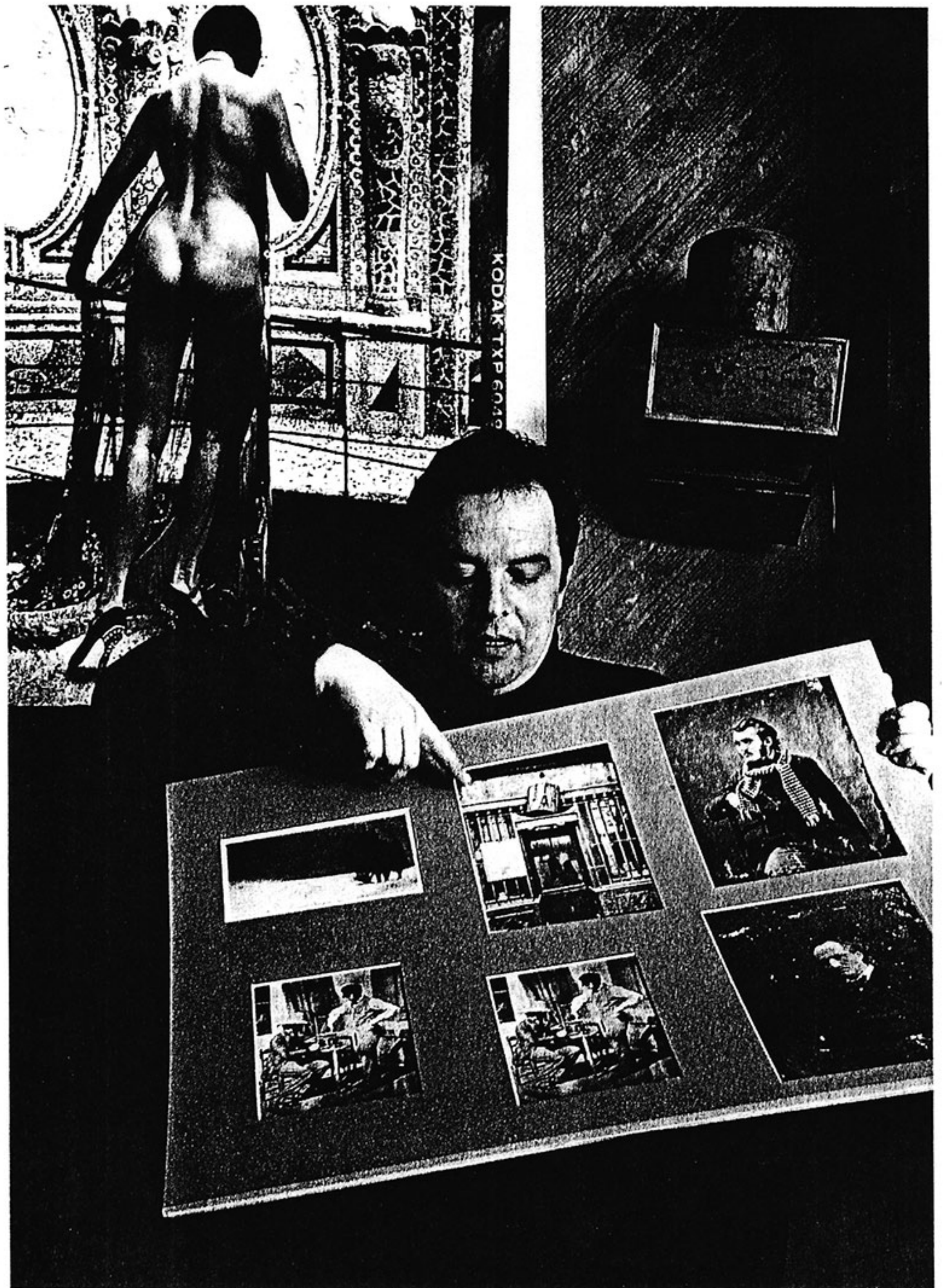
At the end of the twentieth century the photographic industry is focussing its attention on the development of digital photography and reproduction systems. On visiting a photographic fair these days, the first impression one gets is that it is in fact a computer fair. At least one screen can be found on practically every stand. But: for every trend there is a counter-trend.

SIn the same way that computerisation of modern households has led to a boom in the fountain pen industry and that digitisation of watches has led to a renaissance of analog timepieces „Made in Switzerland“, so the introduction of simply processed black-and-white plastic papers has not led to the extinction of classic baryta papers. There are some specialised dealers who sell as much baryta paper as RC photoprint material. The good old print on baryta paper is still something special because of the depth of its tonal value.

But who does one go to when an unusual, individual print is what is needed? A number of international fashion photographers and photographic journalists whose pictures are in increasing demand from exhibition organisers and collectors have been asking this question too. These professionals are the main customers of what are known as fine art printers, some of who also make use of unusual printing processes and alternative printing technologies. All one has to do to find such specialists is to look around the international centres of the photographic world - New York, Paris, London. The professional laboratory „Metro Imaging“ in London has, for example, one laboratory technician whose sole job is to produce platinum prints. The black-and-white laboratory „Imaginoir“ in Paris has also started to produce platinum prints. There are about 10 darkroom professionals in the French capital who use platinum, charcoal and pigments to satisfy their customers' exacting requirements.

Their suitability for long-term storage is one of their main advantages apart from their special aesthetic appeal, the depth of their tonal value and the qualities of the substrate material. All the studios in Paris have one thing in common, irrespective of the technique they use: their lists of customers read like a „Who's Who“ of fashion photography.

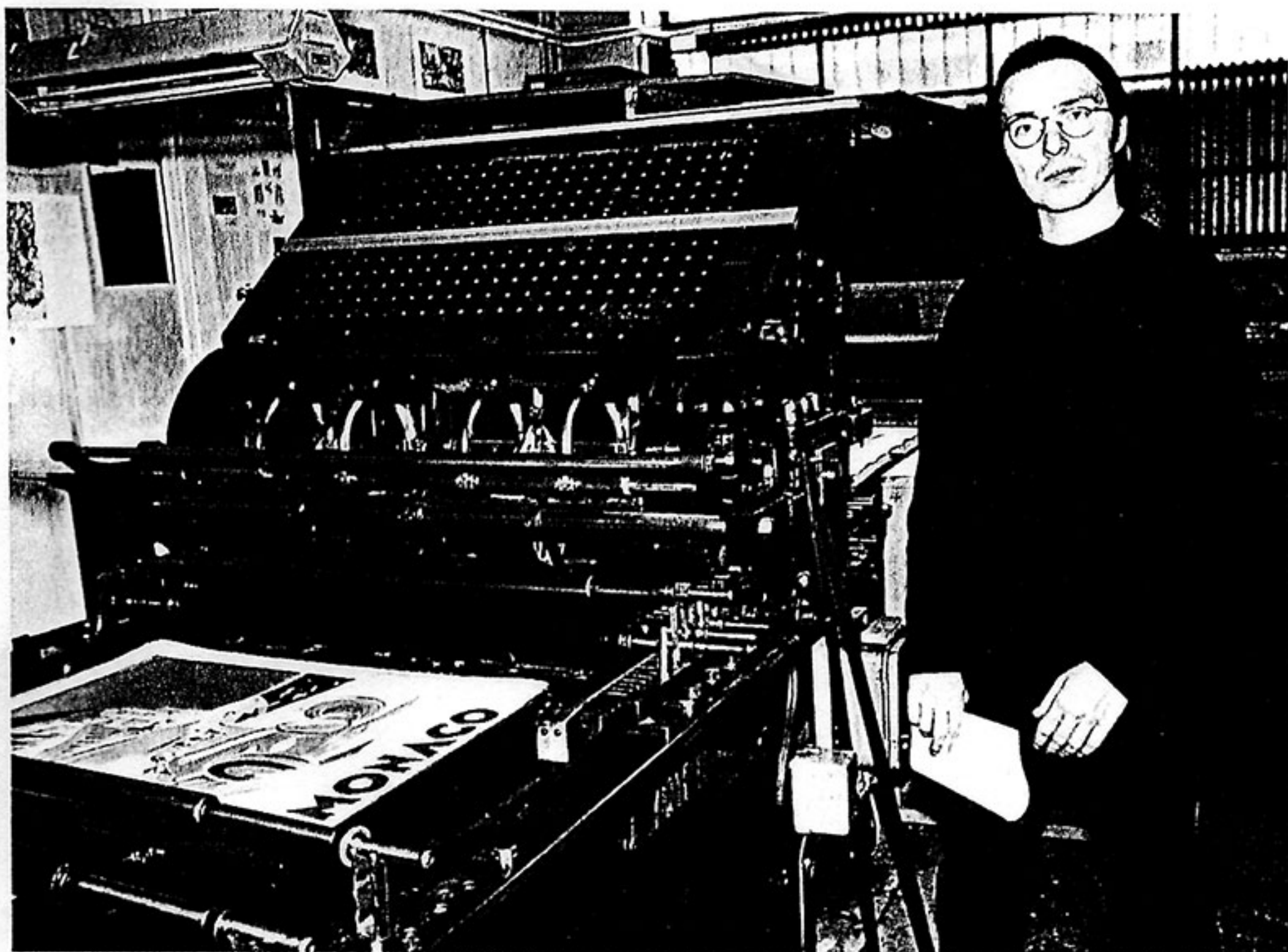
The most curious and certainly one of the oldest laboratories in the world can be found in Savigny/Orge, forty kilometres south of Paris. The fourth generation of the Fresson family is now running the „Atelier Fresson“ there. All the photographs produced at the studio are made by the direct charcoal process invented by Théodore-Henri Fresson in 1890. Pulverised wood charcoal was originally used as a pigment, which is where the process got its name. A variety of different pigments is used nowadays. In the Fresson



process, the negatives are copied onto paper coated with a bi-chromatised gelatine that contains pigments with the help of a arc lamp (UV light). The exposed areas are hardened by the UV light, while the unexposed areas are then rinsed with water at a temperature of 32° C for one minute. This explains why the studio looks more like a laundry than a darkroom. The most modern piece of equipment at the Fresson studio is a digital thermometer. All the rest of the equipment was built in-house. Fresson's big secret is a machine with which the papers can be coated both quickly and consistently. The enlargement unit consists of an arc lamp around which four

Marc Bruhat with platinum prints and historical photos. In the background: a picture by Helmut Newton, for whom he used to work (photo above).

Samples of the work done at the Fresson studio From left to right: Sheila Metzner, Deborah Turbeville, Chico Bialas, Paolo Roversi (photo on the left).



Jules Maeght, manager of the art printing shop „Arte“ with a collotype printing machine.

enlargers are arranged in a star pattern that project the negatives horizontally onto the four papers at the same time. All the equipment is made of wood. The maximum photo dimensions are 62 x 85 cm. Due to the use of different pigments, a very large number of different tones are possible in the black-and-white process, which Michel Fresson and his son Jean-François generally carry out in two passes because of the better black tones this allows. There is a very extensive selection of different papers too. Pierre Fresson took up colour pigment printing in 1952. As is the case with the black-and-white process, prints or slides are the starting point for the colour process as well. The negatives for imagesetting purposes are then produced from them.

Four colour separations (cyan, yellow, magenta, black) are required for the production of colour prints. The papers have to be rinsed, dried and coated with a new gelatine layer between the individual stages of the imagesetting process. This makes the whole process very time-consuming. The production of a colour print takes three to four days; the imagesetting time takes 15 minutes per layer with a 30 x 40 print and an hour in the case of a 60 x 80 print. The big advantages of the colour process - like the monochrome process - are the durability of the prints and the endless variety possible in colour control. This permits photographers to give their works a personal

touch. It is fashion photographers who are Fresson's main customers. The most well-known names are Paolo Roversi, Christian Moser, Chico Bialas, André Carrara, Sheila Metzner and Deborah Turbeville. Archives and collections are further customers of the Fresson family, because they are particularly appreciative of the long-term storage potential of the colour pigments used. The prices of the prints are not excessively high, in spite of the large amount of time required. A 30 x 40 cm black-and-white print costs about DM 150, a colour print DM 220.

One of the most popular processes in Paris is platinum printing. The outstanding feature of this process is the very distinguished tones it produces. A contact process is used here, in which a paper made sensitive to light with an iron salt solution is exposed to natural or UV light and is developed in a platinum salt solution. Pure platinum is deposited on the exposed areas in the course of the development operation. This process is relatively expensive as a result. The main problem apart from controlling the exposure operation is the production of large negatives for the contact prints. One of the master printers in Paris has found a solution to this problem. Marc Bruhat produces his negatives with the help of computer science. The photographs are scanned and are then exposed again in the required size on negative material. The advantages of this are the ability to retouch the pictures on the computer and the speed at which the process can be carried out.

Marc Bruhat also produces what are known as ultra-stable colour prints, for which he makes the colour separations in the same way. He started

with a conventional black-and-white laboratory at the beginning of the Eighties. In the meantime he generates 50% of his business with alternative techniques and is therefore convinced that platinum printing and ultra-stable colour prints have a very promising future. He will be opening a new, larger laboratory in September, where he will be concentrating to a larger extent on the alternative techniques. Like Fresson and the others in his field, he does not need to advertise. He is the only supplier who has produced platinum prints for Robert Doisneau. Other leading photographic journalists, such as Henri Cartier-Bresson, Willy Ronis and Boubat are customers of his as well. Marc Bruhat's customers also include Dominique Issermann, Bettina Reims, Sarah Moon and Helmut Newton. He enlarged the photos for Newton's exhibition „Big Nude“. He works for the French national collection as well. American photographers like David Seidner prefer to work with Marc Bruhat too. This is attributable primarily to the special papers and the lower prices in France. One platinum print 30 x 40 cm from Marc Bruhat (including the negative) costs about DM 200. Each further print costs DM 120.

The gallery owner Didier Brousse works for a handful of selected photographers. Almost all of them exhibit regularly in his photographic gallery „Camera Obscura“ in Rue Ernst Cresson / Paris. Before he opened his gallery, he ran a black-and-white laboratory in the north of Paris, in which he exhibited photographs by his customers at regular intervals. This gave him the idea of opening a gallery, which he manages with his Japanese wife Kiyoko. His speciality are platinum prints on Japanese calligraphic papers.

The American Robert Mann, on the other hand, uses the pre-coated „Palladio“ paper made in the USA for his platinum prints. Robert made his first prints in his father's darkroom at the age of eight. He really wanted to become a musician, but then he started working at the well-known photographic laboratory „Photomontage“ in Hollywood when he was 20. He then set up a business of his own and soon became the black-and-white specialist for the photographic elite in Los Angeles (Philip Dixon, Helmut Newton, Greg Gorman, Mathew Rolston, Herb Ritts).

Following a year in New York, during which he worked mainly for Mary Ellen Mark, he came to Paris in 1989. A look through the list of his customers suggests that it would be easier to say which famous fashion photographers are not customers of his. Since he has been living in Paris he has also supplied platinum prints (maximum dimensions 30 x 40 cm).